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ABSTRACT

The development of second language skills through teaching modified subject matter content has the potential for assisting limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in development of the academic language skills they need to participate successfully in the mainstream classroom. Rather than focusing on language forms and functions alone, content-based second language instruction also develops conceptual knowledge appropriate to the student's grade level. This approach has potential for developing academic competence, and the ability to learn through English, rather than merely to communicate in English. Whether or not this potential is realized depends in large part on four factors: an understanding of the nature and objectives of content-based language development; the training and selection of teachers to deliver content-based instruction to LEP students; the structuring of the content-based English language development curriculum; and the instructional approach best suited to deliver this curriculum. (MSE)

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English Language Development Through a Content-Based Approach

Anna Uhl Chamot

The development of second language skills through teaching modified subject matter content has the potential for assisting limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in the development of the academic language skills they need to participate successfully in the mainstream classroom. Rather than focusing on language forms and functions alone, content-based second language instruction also develops conceptual knowledge appropriate to the student's grade level. This approach has the potential for developing what Saville-Troike (1984) has termed *academic competence*, or the ability to learn through English, rather than the ability to merely communicate in English. Whether this potential is realized or not depends in large part on four important factors:

- An understanding of the nature and objectives of content-based language development;
- The training and selection of teachers to deliver content-based instruction to LEP students;
- The structuring of the content-based English language development (ELD) curriculum;
- The instructional approach best suited to deliver this curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of these four areas, pointing out both benefits and potential hazards of content-based ELD.

Objectives of Content-Based English Language Development

A content-based approach to ELD seeks to develop both second language skills and academic concepts appropriate to the student's grade level. Mohan (1979) describes three types of content-based second language instruction: in the first, the focus is on the content, and language skills develop incidentally; in the second, both content and language

teaching are formally incorporated into the instructional approach; and in the third, the specific type of language needed for a particular subject or discipline is taught as preparation for content instruction in the target language.

In planning which of these three types of content-based instruction may be most beneficial to a particular group of LEP students, identification of the principles that are important for the English language development aspects of the approach need to be considered. Of primary importance are the specification of the instructional objectives for the students concerned; the vocabulary and language functions needed to meet these objectives; and the language skills required, whether listening, reading, speaking, writing, or a combination of these skills.

For instance, the instructional objectives for students in kindergarten and first grade primarily involve the development of initial basic skills, including special emphasis on language skills, so young children may be able to acquire these aspects of the new language through Mohan's first type of content-based second language instruction, exposure to modified content alone. Success in this type of content-based instruction has been reported in studies of immersion programs in Canada. For the older elementary student who has not had the first years of formal schooling to develop oral proficiency and initial literacy in the new language, mere exposure to modified content may not be sufficient to develop academic competence in English, and these middle and upper elementary students may profit more from Mohan's second type of content-based instruction, in which specific language teaching is combined with content teaching. Secondary school LEP students have only a few years in which to learn the English they need to graduate from high school, and for them, Mohan's third type of content-based instruction may be necessary so that they can learn the specific language required for different subjects as quickly as possible. Thus, all three types of content instruction may be advantageous in developing academic language skills and concepts at different grade levels and levels of English proficiency.

An important benefit associated with content-based ELD instruction is increased student motivation (De Avila and Duncan 1984). A content area that is intrinsically interesting can be expected to motivate students more than a study of language for its own sake.

The most important thing that teachers need to understand about content-based instruction for LEP students is the language development component. This consists of:

- Vocabulary and technical terms associated with the subject (e.g., math, social studies, science);
- Language functions needed for academic communication (e.g., informing, explaining, classifying, evaluating);

- Language structures and discourse features associated with different academic disciplines (e.g., use of passive constructions in science texts or lack of redundancy in math word problems);
- Language skills emphasized in the classroom for different academic functions (e.g., listening comprehension for academic explanations, reading for information, speaking for oral presentations, writing for reports).

The language development component is what distinguishes a content-based second language approach from merely simplified mainstream content instruction. Without a clear understanding of the ways in which language can be developed through content, nonspecialist teachers could perceive it as no different from instruction for native English-speaking students. The hazard to be considered is that if content-based ELD instruction is really no different from mainstream teaching, the program can easily become a submersion approach to learning English, in which students learn neither English nor content.

Teacher Preparation

A serious difficulty in implementing content-based instruction for ELD is in the selection and training of teachers. The ideal teacher of content-based ELD is one who can teach both the content subjects of the curriculum and English language development and has the ability to intertwine the two. Elementary school teachers often teach all subjects in the curriculum, and when ESL training and experience are added to their preparation, they can develop the expertise to provide content-based ELD instruction. Secondary school teacher preparation programs, on the other hand, usually train teachers to teach one or two content subjects only. In high school, therefore, close collaboration between ESL teachers and content teachers in planning, teaching, and evaluating activities that develop both the academic language skills and concepts of their LEP students is essential. In addition, inservice training for content teachers in ESL methodology and for ESL teachers in content areas would be beneficial in developing a content-based instructional approach. The need for teacher training in content-based ELD is demonstrated by a recent survey of secondary ESL teachers in which the top instructional priority was considered to be strategies for ESL instruction in the content areas (McGroarty 1985).

Curriculum Structure

The Canadian immersion model is often identified as a successful curriculum for content-based bilingual education. In this model, young

English-speaking children receive instruction in all subjects in French, their second language; the instruction is modified so that they can comprehend it; the teacher understands English, but does not use it for instruction; and children begin to have instruction in their first language after several years of instruction solely in their second language.

This model is difficult to implement in the United States for a variety of reasons. First, the Canadian students in these immersion programs are majority language middle-class children. Second, the children all start together in kindergarten and gradually acquire both language and concepts as they move up through the grades as a homogeneous group. Third, all the students share the same first language, and the teachers are bilingual—factors that facilitate the delivery of instruction that is comprehensible to the students. In the United States, on the other hand, the vast majority of LEP students are from low-income families; they enter school at every grade level rather than only in kindergarten; and in many schools they come from a variety of language backgrounds, so that a teacher would have to be multilingual in order to understand all the children's first languages.

Implementing a content-based language development curriculum has particular hazards for the older elementary and secondary school student. In an effort to make the subject matter of fourth, eighth, or eleventh grade comprehensible to the LEP student, teachers and curriculum developers may unwittingly be providing a watered-down curriculum for these students. An attempt to simplify the language of instruction can lead to the simplification of content. By making content less intellectually challenging, LEP students are effectively denied equal access to the mainstream curriculum.

Research has verified the existence of the watered-down curriculum and has also shown how it can be avoided. For instance, Moll and Diaz (1982) found important differences in the way bilingual third graders were instructed. In the Spanish reading class, the children in the high level group participated successfully in cognitively demanding reading comprehension activities, while the same children in the English reading class were not required or expected to do more than rote decoding. They were receiving a watered-down curriculum in English reading, and potential transfer of reading comprehension strategies developed in Spanish was neither encouraged nor even permitted to occur. In total contrast, another group of elementary bilingual children demonstrated significant gains in both conceptual knowledge and English through participation in an experimental math/science curriculum that not only provided bilingual instruction but also challenged children to think about the concepts they were learning (De Avila 1984).

Three cautions are in order in avoiding a watered-down curriculum. First, the content-based language development curriculum should not be

seen as a substitute for the mainstream curriculum, but rather as a preparation for it. Second, at upper elementary and secondary levels at least, intensive development of proficiency in all four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) needs to take place before grade-appropriate content can be taught successfully because, as Mohan (1986) indicates, content teaching will not be successful if students do not have some basic understanding of the language in which the content is presented. Third, even though the language of the content-based curriculum may be simplified, the development of higher order skills and concepts should be an integral part of such a curriculum.

An example of careful sequencing of a language skills and content-based curriculum is found in the High Intensity Language Training (HILT) program in El Paso, Texas (Apodaca 1985). In this program, junior and senior high students with limited English proficiency begin by taking intensive English as a second language courses. In addition, they also take courses to develop the English language skills necessary for math, which is the content area considered least language dependent. Next, the students take a "sheltered" math course, which is a grade appropriate mathematics course especially designed for LEP students. Finally, they are mainstreamed into a mathematics class in which they must compete with native English speakers. In subjects which are more language dependent, such as science and social studies, students are provided with additional ESL instruction before they follow a similar progression from (1) learning first the language necessary for studying the subject to (2) a class in the subject in which they only compete with other LEP students to (3) a mainstream classroom in which they must compete with native English speakers in mastering the concepts of the particular discipline. Thus, this curriculum first prepares students in basic English proficiency, next teaches them the language specific to a particular discipline, then provides them with a meaningful learning experience in the subject without being pressured by competition from native English speakers, and finally moves them to the mainstream curriculum when they are prepared to compete successfully in both subject matter and English language proficiency.

Instructional Approach

A cognitive approach to second language instruction is more appropriate to a content-based ELD curriculum than is a communicative approach that focuses on social interactive skills. A cognitive approach makes use of prior knowledge and emphasizes the information processing capability of the learner. A recent development within cognitive approaches to second language learning is work done on learning strategies which indicates that students can be trained by teachers to

become more effective learners (Chamot and O'Malley 1984; O'Malley et al., in press). Learning strategies are special techniques that students can use on their own to help them learn and remember new information; the strategies can be applied in both language and concept learning.

A cognitive approach to second language instruction coupled with a content-based language development curriculum would have both similarities and differences from a purely communicative approach to second language teaching. Both approaches focus on the communication of meaning through a second language rather than on drill and practice of grammatical patterns. In both approaches, small group activities in which students engage in cooperative problem solving provide opportunities for active and meaningful practice of the second language. The two basic differences in these approaches are in *what* is learned and the *language skills* that are emphasized.

- A *communicative* approach focuses on the notions and functions underlying sociolinguistic competence.
- A *cognitive* approach for the content-based second language curriculum focuses on the notions and functions underlying academic linguistic competence.
- A *communicative* approach emphasizes the development of the listening and speaking skills that will permit the second language learner to interact in a socially appropriate way with speakers of the target language.
- A *cognitive* approach for the content-based curriculum emphasizes the development of the reading, writing, and academic oral language skills that permit the second language learner to use the target language to participate successfully in the mainstream curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a description of some of the major components of a content-based second language development program and has discussed some benefits to be expected, some potential hazards to be avoided, and some problems to be solved.

Two potential hazards are that content-based language development instruction in the hands of teachers without specialized training could become another name for submersion or could result in a watered-down curriculum. Problems to be solved include provision of additional teacher training, the sequencing and integration of the language and content components of such a curriculum, and the preparation of instructional materials designed to develop academic language skills through content instruction.

The potential hazards can be avoided, and the inherent problems can be solved. We need to do so because the benefits that can emerge from a content-based approach to second language development are great. This type of English language development program is designed specifically to address the need of LEP students in this country to gain the academic competence they need to compete successfully in the mainstream curriculum. By competing successfully in school, these students can obtain access to participation in the mainstream of U.S. life.

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